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COMMENT



People, personal projects and the challenging of social structures: a contribution to the reflection on the challenges of teaching development studies

Juan David Parra Heredia

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article makes a critique of using Post-Development as a tool in teaching an introductory course in development studies. Such a debate was initiated by Harcourt in a previous issue of *Third World Quarterly* as she reflected on her teaching experience in a European Institution. Harcourt concludes that the lack of engagement of some of the students in the course reflects the unwillingness of privileged middle-class pupils to challenge western lifestyles. I draw on a critical realist meta-theory about the process of learning in higher education to challenge the ontological support of that conclusion and invite her to reconsider her teaching strategy.

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Introduction

This article draws on some reflections published in a recent volume of *Third World Quarterly* concerning the idea of teaching development studies to students from the so-called developing world. I will refer particularly to some of the elements entailed in the following argument, as expressed by its author as she shares her reflections on her personal experience teaching an introductory course on development in an Institute of Critical Development Studies in Europe:¹

Does Post-Development distract from pragmatic reforms of development cooperation? Does Post-Development ignore the fact that many people in the South desire western-style models of development? Both questions are very pertinent to the responses of the students in this experimental first year of the General Course. A solid group of students (the 30% who rated the course below 3.5) looked for pragmatic and down-to-earth reforms of development and were not interested in alternatives to western-style models of development. They were representative of the privileged middle class from the Global South who were used to western lifestyles. They did not see the point of looking for alternatives; they wanted improvements in development that could reach all people.²

I situate my reflection in my own experience teaching political economy in a Latin American University. Given our proximity to the North American academia³ Colombia has a restricted

CONTACT Juan David Parra Heredia jparrah@gmail.com <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1902-7660>

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offer in teaching *development*.⁴ In fact, its local academia is more prone to endorse the disciplinary boundaries of economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, etc. I was fortunate to find space in a reputed University in the north of the country to teach a course named *Society, Economics and Politics*, and frame it from a more European approach to development studies (I will further refer to the style and the content of the course in the text). My course is also an introductory one and refers to many of the topics and discussions that Harcourt, the author of the cited article, explores in her syllabus. It is also relevant to mention that I undertook my PhD training at the same institution where the quoted author teaches her course and, while I was never her student, I actively engaged in conversations with its participants (in the corridors, in other lectures, in the bar). For that, I am not claiming authority, nor I intend to judge Harcourt in any way personally or professionally. My aim is rather to contribute to the reflection she proposes on the challenge of teaching *development*. For doing so, I consider relevant to problematise some the assumptions of the approach she and her colleagues decided to follow (Post-Development [PD] as tool-kit), as well as some of her insights on why some of the students did not get engaged in conversations about the making of development.

The core argument of this text concerns Harcourt's reflection about 'the highly political process of the production of knowledge (what counts as knowledge, who has the authority to teach, in which language, from which history)'.⁵ Here I am not denying that teaching (and learning) are political endeavours or that teachers have power over students in defining what these latter ones should learn. My point is that in the urge 'to close the disconnections between the spaces of teaching/learning and the realities of the world beyond'⁶ partly by 'not trying to test knowledge that students should reproduce',⁷ the course leaders fall in contradictions that help to understand some of the responses they saw in students. My critique, however, I insist, is not directed towards the skills of the attitudes of the teaching staff of the course, but rather to the ontological departure upon which they relied on to teach an introduction to development studies. By appealing to arguments from scholarly literature about pedagogy (i.e. the teaching and learning debate) in higher education, I invite them to envision their immanent authority in the classroom as an opportunity and not as a burden, to guide the making of the critical thinking of students. The presentation of my proposal to teach development seeks to materialise such view.

The article has the following structure. In the first section, I make an overview of Harcourt's PD approach to teaching development and elucidate some of its ontological assumptions. To set my critique and proposal in sections three and four, in section two I briefly revise classical philosophical debates in social theory (i.e. the objective–subjective divide) vis-à-vis the interpretations of PD scholars about them and situate such reflections in the realm of teaching and learning in higher education.

PD as a tool for education: an overview

Harcourt's proposal to introduce students to the *making* and the *unmaking of development* found inspiration in Paulo Freire's view of education as 'the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world'.⁸ Consequently, she explains, during the course sessions, teachers placed their focus in 'asking questions and not telling answers'⁹ and they sought to 'create a safe space where epistemic violence could be countered through

ethical engagements with other students, a connection that could extend beyond the classroom.¹⁰ Importantly, she contends, given the current context of growing anti-immigration and racism in European societies, the design of the course had opponents, like other staff members, possibly reflecting 'years of colonial education that positions teachers as hierarchal providers of knowledge.'¹¹ The same logic indicated that it was important to counterbalance the belief that 'knowledge was from books, not songs or videos or stories.'¹² In this last point, however, the teaching staff had to consider endorsing a more standard teaching style in the second part of the course, given that 'flipping the classroom in the lectures and interactive pedagogy were not working.'¹³ That decision responded to the realisation that 'students coming from 57 countries had experienced very different pedagogical processes'¹⁴ which entailed, according to the author, that many of them were 'bemused'¹⁵ by the PD approach.

It is from that last of Harcourt's reflections from which I initiate my critical overview of her, and her colleagues', teaching strategy. The lack of clarity in the connection between the messages the teaching staff sought to convey to students with the personal projects of the later ones, as the author somehow acknowledges it, is key to sustain my critique. For the sake of rigour, however, I first proceed with introducing basic definitions pertaining the ontology that underlies Harcourt's approach to teaching, as reflected in her paper. Here I will focus on the understanding of the aims of PD, on the one hand, and the operationalisation of Freire's popular education, on the other. Regarding the first concept, Escobar argues that one departing point to imagining a PD world entails 'challenging reinterpretation of modernity'.¹⁶ In doing so:

changing the order of discourse is a political question that entails the collective practice of social actors and the restructuring of existing political economies of truth. In the case of development, this may require moving away from development sciences in particular and a partial, strategic move away from conventional Western modes of knowing in general in order to make room for other types of knowledge and experience.¹⁷

Following the application of the course leaders, Escobar's argument entailed, therefore, 'trying not to give an authoritative and definitive view of what development was as such'¹⁸ but rather to examine 'different practices of development and modernity using PD as a tool to look at how power operates in development processes.'¹⁹ Interestingly, the staff decided *deliberately* 'not [to] present first the dominant stories of development and then dismantle [them]'.²⁰ They rather animated students 'to re-think the way they have experienced and observed development being been done in their lives, and in sharing those experiences to think together about new narratives decided'.²¹ Here one can find links between PD, as a tool, to Freire's framework as a paradigm 'in which teacher and students are capable of dialogue and of problematising together, and in which the teacher has a guileless faith in the students'.²² By rejecting the banking concept of education, which assumes students as passive recipients of a gift called knowledge from those who consider themselves knowledgeable, Freire seeks to unleash the transformational and creative capability of people against the interest of *the oppressor*. Therefore, the efforts of the humanist and revolutionary educator:

must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.²³

Under such view, it is now clear that the teacher should neither claim any authority based on her knowledge about a specific topic nor because of her skills to teach. In fact, as Walsh

contents, Freire's interest was not about pedagogy as a discipline. For her, that is the case because he pondered its signification 'in the practices, strategies, methodologies and ways of making and doing that interweave with, and are constructed in resistance and opposition, as well as in insurgence, affirmation and re-existence, in imagining and building a different world'.²⁴ Back to the course in which Harcourt participated as its leader, the epistemic position of the pedagogy of the oppressed helps in understanding the persistence of the teaching staff in the importance of peer-to-peer learning as part (now) of workshops. Despite the staff's decision to going back to more traditional teaching–student practices, these complementary spaces served to move into creative work 'ranging from writing poetry, to sharing songs, role plays and online discussion with photographs and blogs, and there was more ease now with open-ended questions and challenging assumptions about the doing of development'.²⁵

Personally, I agree with many of the political vindications that emanate from visualising education as an emancipatory tool, rather than as an input–output type of device to discipline students with incontestable knowledge. I see this arbitrariness as part of the mainstream view of education as instructing people, commonly associated with positivism in educational research.²⁶ However, I believe that the post-structural branch from which many of the ideas exposed in this section stem from is also guilty of types of ontological authoritarianism that, in the best of cases, leaves unexplained the rationale behind the assumptions of PD, and its view of resistance, change and social transformation. My questions emerge from the comments Harcourt and her team received from their students, and the interpretations that the teaching staff did about them. For instance, why would the course leaders assume that the participants of the course considered themselves as part of *the oppressed* when they acknowledged that many of them were representative of privileged middle classes from the Global South? Do students bring the experiential knowledge enough to make them aware of some basic characteristics and properties of those structures that the course invites them to challenge and reinvent? Is there an ontological reason to justify the deliberate abandonment of the study of the mainstream discourses of development, and in an introductory course to development studies, before engaging in their critique? I address those questions in the rest of the document.

Positioning my critique: some ontological elements

Ontologically and epistemologically I speak from the grounds of the philosophy of Critical Realism (CR), one that, as its name itself suggests it, represents an alternative to engage into critical reflections about society. Many educators and (critical) researchers in education today have openly endorsed many of its tenets or meta-theorisation principles.²⁷ However, the main reason why I think CR is valuable to inform the current debate about teaching development is that it explicitly problematises some of the political positions of PD (as a tool book). Let us think, for example, on Escobar's way of celebrating that '[u]nlike major analytical tendencies in the West, the anthropology of modernity²⁸ in terms of hybrid cultures does not intend to provide a solution to the philosophy of the subject and the problem of subject-centred reason'.²⁹ His argument for not doing is that the developing world should not be conceptualised as an unfinished project of the Enlightenment. Hence, we, its inhabitants, must be reluctant to normative debates (such as the objective–subjective divide), proposed

by scholars from the west that visualise us as unfinished (or underdeveloped) citizens. As he further notes:

Timothy Mitchell unveils another important mechanism at work in European representations of other societies (...) For the modern (European) subject, this entailed that s/he would experience life as if s/he were set apart from the physical world, as if s/he were a visitor at an exhibition. The observer inevitably 'enframed' external reality in order to make sense of it; this enframing took place according to European categories. What emerged was a regime of objectivism in which Europeans were subjected to a double demand: to be detached and objective, and yet to immerse themselves in local life (...) This regime of order and truth is a quintessential aspect of modernity and has been deepened by economics and development. It is reflected in an objectivist and empiricist stand that dictates that the Third World and its peoples exist 'out there', to be known through theories and intervened upon from the outside.³⁰

Again, I enthusiastically endorse a political position that 'directly impinges on the project of human emancipation from reproduced structures of domination that constrain our essential freedom'.³¹ Hence, I applaud the explicit intention to problematise the colonising view that victimises the south and portrays the north as those who will rescue it from its incompleteness. However, CR scholars would problematise the PD's arbitrary denial of the relevance of reconciling the notions of objectivity and subjectivity, as it emerges from conflating ontological arguments (i.e. how do people, as subjects, learn something) with epistemological ones (i.e. the question of whether what people learn is true or not). For Escobar, the problem with objectivity is that people cannot judge anything objectively because that would entail them to detach from their experience as members of the spaces they research. He also highlights the political dimension of claims about methodological objectivity, as, through them, people from the Global South are epistemologically violented to embrace *true* claims from the North. For Collier, such arguments are missing the point:

While the word 'object' still has the sense 'object of ...', intentional object, as well as the sense 'material thing', the word 'objective' has, in everyday speech and most philosophical usage, totally lost its original connection with being the object of something (of some 'subject'). (...) [O]bjectivity is not neutrality. There may be objective grounds for deciding one way or the other between competing positions, and if there are, neutrality can only be subjective in the bad sense – that is, a position about an object is maintained because of features of the judging subject rather than because of features of the object. (...) Something is not objective because some subject judges it, but whether or not any subject judges it or even exists. Hence there need be no answer to the question 'Who is to say that it is objective?', a question that is consequently always a red herring. Maybe no one can say whether some particular fact or value is objective, but that does not impugn its objectivity.³²

There are two issues that I would like to highlight when introducing these ontological elements to the discussion. Firstly, I invite us all to challenge the reluctance of PD thinkers to refer to objectivity without a clear or explicit philosophical backup. When I refer to the arbitrariness in deciding upon criteria on how to elaborate upon some discussions, and not others, based on a problematic reading of western philosophy, I am emphasising upon the existence of deep contradictions that limit the potential of the PD's political project. For example, '[PD thinkers] hold society to be made up of inter-subjective meanings, but they are also maintaining this to be objectively the case'.³³ My biggest concern lies, however, in the way some of the assumptions backing up PD might obfuscate the social transformational power of education that its exponents are aiming to unleash. In the rest of this section, I clarify some elements of the objective–subjective debate to conceptualise the idea of social

transformation better. In the next section, I contextualise that discussion in the specific realm of teaching and learning in higher education.

Back to Collier's argument, when critical realists refer the ontological existence of objective social structures acting upon human beings, he is clear that he is not talking about objective knowledge and neither about a notion of neutrality that rules out all kinds of subjectivity when we refer to human interactions.³⁴ His concern, in this specific point, is not about the validation of knowledge (item to which I refer in the next section), but rather in making an ontological claim about a basic relationship between objects, as real things, and the subjective dimension of the observers that interpret and act upon those objects. We hence talk about objectivity, in the sense that '[people] react to the situations in which they find themselves, [yet], they may remain unaware of the factors which moulded such situations or of some of their properties'.³⁵ The argument that social structures are acting upon us, whether we acknowledge them or not, or whether we consider them legitimate or not, is one that PD thinkers, even if they say the opposite, endorse. How else would they justify engaging in an *ethnography of modernity*, if they deny the structures of modernity acting upon, and *oppressing*, citizens of the Global South? Recognising that there are objects in the world shaping the life of human beings independently of people's awareness of them does not mean validating the neutrality in which those structures (i.e. the think tanks of the World Bank) address policy-making in some countries. Rather, it entails arguing that for instance:

universities and academic life cannot nowadays be understood in any serious way unless attention is paid to its deep and global structures, such as the global knowledge economy, cognitive capitalism, neoliberalism, state and regional policy frameworks and the developing digital age. These structures profoundly both shape and even condition universities and the life of academics and so can be said to impart horizons to the work of universities. The university, and those who work in them, are implicated in these structures, whether these structures are recognized or not.³⁶

If we accept my initial argument, meaning that PD thinkers exhibit a problematic understanding of what objectivity accounts for in western philosophy, the clarifications above should also make clear that the subjective–objective divide is an artificial, or an irrelevant, one. That is the case because, firstly, '[w]ithout subjective feelings of grievance about objective oppression, subjective discontent about objective discrimination (...) none of the familiar structural changes would ensue in society'.³⁷ Furthermore, if there were not objective social structures, with objective elements and patterns that connect many of our experiences, how come are we all conversing about common things (like the idea of teaching development)? Secondly, and elaborating upon this first idea, if social scientists embrace the possibility of social transformation, the subjective action of social subjects is something which they can hardly underemphasise. Willmott's work in educational research is explicit about it:

if one accepts, for instance, the obdurate reality of those capitalist economies currently afflicted by crisis, then those job-seekers who are unable to find a position within the employment structure cannot 'do otherwise' (...). [T]his is part and parcel of entering the wrong theoretical door, for stringent [objective] structural conditioning is fundamentally not deterministic, for pupils, like teachers, resist (...) Hence, one can talk about the agential [subjective] 'mediation' of structure because emergent structural properties only work through people, not in spite of people.³⁸

Objectivity and subjectivity hence coexist, even if social scientists are unwilling to recognise it. Of course, this is a charge for which we can not only find PD thinkers guilty: 'in much contemporary sociological theory, what used to be [subjective] human agents now shamble

along, unmotivated, hypnotised by habit.³⁹ It is a trend, rather than an exception, to reduce people to zombies or to ‘automatons for social structures’;⁴⁰ hence reproducing artificial settings were the objective powers of social structures smash all possibilities of subjectivity in the action of human beings. The alternative, as Archer contends, cannot consist in falling in reproducing the image of the *modern man from the Enlightenment*, as one that is intrinsically, and instrumentally, rational and uses reason to master nature. As she proposes in her book *Being Human*, the departing principle is much simpler (and less deterministic), and entails that ‘our most basic practices, basic in terms of our physical survival, are better portrayed as our embodied accommodation to the mercy of nature, and not the other way around.’⁴¹ Conceiving the objective and subjective dimensions of social action is, hence, vital to understanding how people struggle to survive and use their subjective powers to try to transform (or not) objective situations that oppress their (ontological) freedom to decide for themselves.

People, personal projects and (objective) social structures: reclaiming the authority of the educator

My aim now is to situate the ontological debate from the last section in the realm of higher education. The objective here is to build an argument to reclaim the authority of educators in teaching development, further than (solely) engaging in active conversations with students. Back to Harcourt’s text, it is worth noting that, despite the implementation of a PD approach to teaching development studies, the teaching staff decided to shift back to more traditional teacher–student lecturing practices. Somehow, she expresses frustration in having had to do so, probably as she sees here a contradiction between the aims and the methods of the course. My intention is not to argue that the latter result is proof of the failure of the PD toolbox in helping students to engage in critical thinking. In fact, what Harcourt and her colleagues’ experience unveils is that combining more traditional teacher–student dynamics with workshops focused upon conversations among peers resulted in giving a chance to some students ‘to construct something different from the mainstream and to ask questions of what and how.’⁴² Hence, her role as a teacher helped her to unleash reflexivity, and not simply an attitude friendly to the banking concept of education, in (at least) some class participants.

I start my argument by saying that the field of studies about the process of learning in higher education, as one that is dependent on human’s agency (i.e. the student’s intention to learn), is surprisingly narrow.⁴³ Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela’s recent literature’s review on the topic includes a critical overview of dominant practices and debates about the role of teachers and students in classrooms in universities to conclude that ‘teaching is viewed from a strong cognitive and individual perspective that insufficiently takes into account the social context of teaching practices.’⁴⁴ Phrased in terms of the debate from the last section, most of existing social theories about learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of formal education set their reflection on how educators can effectively (or objectively, they would argue) convey knowledge to students by considering the subjectivity of teachers and students as epiphenomena. Consequently, ‘[w]e have remarkably few studies, for example, which try to understand how strategy is formed and enacted in context, or how it is read, received and interpreted by those who become the subjects of these [learning] discourses.’⁴⁵

A set of scholars, including Williams,⁴⁶ Clegg,⁴⁷ Kahn⁴⁸ and Kahn, Qualter and Young,⁴⁹ among others, have hence proposed some ontological principles, drawing on CR, to re-humanise teachers and, particularly important, students in high education theory. All of their proposals draw explicitly on Archer's notion of agent's reflexivity, to suggest that 'the extent to which an educational task articulates with the concerns of a participant, or is able to engender concerns on their part, will affect the extent to which the participant is actively engaged in their learning.'⁵⁰ Said differently, the engagement of students in the learning (and the unlearning) of something (i.e. learning to resist, to set a critique, to acknowledge situations of unfairness) depends on the possibility for them to build a subjective connection (i.e. interpretation) with elements from their objective circumstances as human beings. From that view 'the self is neither an asocial entity divorced from its socio-historical location with a fixed identity', as in the world of empiricism, '[n]or a contingent epiphenomenon that is reducible to prevailing norms of a society or community',⁵¹ as PD suggests.

One key point to build a meta-theory of learning using CR is to focus on the idea of social transformation, a process that we have catalogued as fundamental in the enterprise of critical education. The idea is quite simple: if we expect students to develop some critical thinking skills to eventually question the mainstream and contribute in transforming their social environments, we need to take social transformation seriously. We now have concrete elements to discuss this issue. On the one hand, we need to somehow address the study of the objective powers of social structures. Conversely, we shall insist upon the argument that it is people, either individually or collectively, who mediate (or activate) the conditioning powers of social structures and pursue (or not), through their intentional actions, forms of social transformation. For Archer, this is a mediatory process, 'during which our general potentialities and liabilities as human agents, necessarily inhabiting a social environment, are transformed into specific projects which agents, both individual and collective, seek to realise in society.'⁵² Here we are not referring to pre-determined (or objectified) projects, like those sponsored by some organisation as the ideal life-project for adolescents to pursue, but rather to the building of subjective expectations by students when they reflect upon society's objectivity. It is not a deterministic account for learning. As Kahn, Qualter and Young content, on the contrary, its base is the study of people's internal (and subjective) conversations:

[Archer] thus posits a progressive specification of concrete courses of action involving the trajectory concerns > projects > practices with this trajectory driven through personal deliberation on oneself and on one's own concerns in relation to society. For Archer, the capacity to engage in such reflexive deliberation, or inner conversation, constitutes a personal power or capacity that emerges in significant part from the practical demands of operating within the world, and that plays an important role in determining why individuals act so rather than otherwise within the same socio-cultural context.⁵³

In summary, what derives from Archer's reasoning is a three-stage process, which is not reflecting a deterministic input–output learning scheme, but rather an opening of different spaces within a classroom setting, for example, for learning to happen and to empower students to pursuit structural change potentially.⁵⁴ First, structural factors (both material and cultural) objectively shape the expectations of students, in this specific case, to learn something. This first stage overlaps with a second one in which students have subjectively predefined (probably before entering the first class) what they believe is important for them to learn. While it is hard for a teacher to have all this information in advance, one could argue that most students that voluntarily enrol into a programme of development studies have a

project which is to learn how to do and promote development. Even if their goal is to rethink or challenge development, that project still will impersonate an interest to understand what development is. Finally (but not conclusively, as it is an iterative process), agents (i.e. teachers with students, students with their peers) deliberate and subjectively determine what they believe is a feasible course of action (at least conceptually) for them to follow. All these potential changes 'emphasise the role of the student-as-actor who personifies the student role with their own biography and concerns'.⁵⁵

What is the role of the teacher or the educator in all this process? This type of framework 'suggests that we need to widen the frame of our discussion beyond the agency of the individual learner [and the individual educator], to include the way that groups of learners and *tutors* pool their agency together'.⁵⁶ Here I make emphasis in the word tutor as a key facilitator for this whole process to take place, and to support this argument it is important to bring back the concept of objectivity to the debate. The question that follows is, hence, the extent to which an educator can provide objective (in the sense of value-free) knowledge to students about the social structures of the world. The immediate answer is a rampant No. Teachers are also agents of society. Hence, they reflect subjectively about different theories of development and have preferences regarding each of them. They also have personal projects that they seek to realise through their actions in the world: educators adhere to fallible theories about what is relevant for students to learn about development. However, if we accept the argument that students can learn to build their own criteria to judge and make sense of social phenomena, there is no reason to sustain the opposite for professional educators. Teachers are experienced students, which means that they, and particularly those who do social research professionally, have trained their capacity of abstraction to navigate across schools of thought unveiling their assumptions and limitations. Educators have hence experienced a process of transforming:

capacities into capabilities, or (...) abstract powers into concrete ones. Of course, for their effective exercise and realisation there must also be the satisfaction of a whole host of social, and arguably natural, conditions (...) However, it is important to hold on to the point that what is released after the shedding [of layers or orders of reality] are the powers of human beings, possibilities of the ground-state which, as such, were possessed all along. These powers, as capacities, are gradually and arduously unfolded, as capabilities, into the actuality of the embodied personality.⁵⁷

The experience of an educator reverts not in her skill to deliver objective knowledge to students, but in the process already experienced by her to unfold her capabilities to navigate across versions of epistemological truth about the objective forces of the world and be critical of them. One advantage of Harcourt's teaching setting is that there is a teaching staff, meaning that students have access to the multiple subjective capacities of their tutors to find guidance in navigating social theory to satisfy their personal projects. These projects are subjective understandings of the world, meaning that they are open to refining and modifications. It is the power of teachers to guide students that allows students to become critical about their personal projects eventually and, for instance, become critical about the mainstream. Those aims become hard to accomplish if teachers fail in addressing, as a departing point, the possible personal project of the students. Harcourt and her colleagues should reconsider, hence, beginning teaching development in its mainstream expression, and profit from their authority as teachers to provoke reflections in students that can eventually result in the rebuilding of their projects. That, for me, represents a more effective way to accomplish their personal project as educators in this course: 'we were conscious of the politics of

teaching in this attempt to close the disconnections between the spaces of teaching/learning and the realities of the world beyond'.⁵⁸

Teaching (and learning) about the challenges of development: a proposal

I now make a brief discussion of my proposal to teach political economy at a University from Northern Colombia. Its rationale elaborates upon the ontological and epistemological debates discussed above. My course has one relevant difference with the one designed by Harcourt and her colleagues, which is that it is imparted to undergraduate students. However, given that my aim is not assessing which methodology had better results, but to provide alternatives on how to think about the topic at hand, I can still provide insights on my ideas on how to approach students in higher education to invite them to become critical about the world they inhabit. It is none-the-less important to mention that both courses seek to introduce students to different theories and perspectives about development, in the form of a general overview of its major debates.⁵⁹

One aspect that is worth mentioning as a background of my teaching project pertains to the way I tried to read the context of my class and the society it is embedded in, seeking to avoid what I believe are crucial mistakes reproduced by many of those who approach the teaching of critical thinking. My sentiment in that regard comes quite well reflected in Palma's reflection on the current situation of stagnation in the critical thinking produced in Latin America:

Perhaps the greatest sign of the intellectual amnesia of the neo-liberal left in LA is to have forgotten that '[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (...) For example, it is no coincidence that [the current] manic managerial defenses have not led the neo-liberal left even into the temptation of questioning the conventional wisdom that in the current globalized world there is no role for human agency in the regulation of market forces. (...) What we have today in LA is the combination of an insatiable capitalist elite, passive citizens, and a stalled social imagination.⁶⁰

As in many places of the planet, neoliberal thinking has penetrated society, contributing to what Palma calls a stalled social imagination.⁶¹ That is important to state, particularly because, as Raworth contends, mainstream economics – arguably, fit to neoliberal thinking – has become 'the mother tongue of public policy, the language of public life, and the mindset that shapes society'.⁶² That is an existing objective phenomenon, whether we acknowledge it or not, and, hence, one that has also shaped the subjective expectations of students. Most of them want to learn how to make efficient public policies to transform society. And given that the language of the policy-making today is the one of economics, then the course should start by addressing elements from basic (mainstream) economic theory. For Raworth, 'it was Paul Samuelson (...) who decisively placed imagery at the heart of economic thought in the second half of the twentieth century'.⁶³ Therefore, the course departs from the reading of the second chapter of Samuelson's introduction to economics (with William Nordhaus) to situate the students in the head of the mainstream policy-maker.

Next, I try making further connections between the student's projects to learn how to foster development by introducing an event that, according to many commentators, made shake the foundations of contemporary economic (hence policy-making) thinking. The economic recession of 2008–2009, I tell them, and its aftermath 'have been sobering times for advocates of progressive policy alternatives'.⁶⁴ The message here is not to tell students that

there is one single correct version of what happened on Wall Street in that year. Such an epistemic argument has two implications. The first one is that the diversity of explanations around one single phenomenon proves that the crisis did happen and had an objective influence in societies across the planet. That statement does not clash with the subjective dimension of the debate. Following Marsh, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) 'was narrated differently in different countries and (...) [such narrative] changed over time as the nature and depth of the economic effects of the crisis in each country became more apparent'.⁶⁵ The second implication is, hence, the need to contrast views of the same phenomena (the GFC) and compare not only their empirical results (i.e. the statistics) but also their underlying assumptions. Raworth's reflections are again valuable in this regard. For her, '[t]he twenty-first-century context demands that we make those assumptions explicit and those blind spots visible so that we can, once again, rethink economics'.⁶⁶

The rest of the course draws on the assumption that the problem of structure and agency 'denote[s] central dilemmas in social theory (...) for the simple reason that it is impossible to do sociology at all without dealing with them and coming to decisions about them'.⁶⁷ Making such a debate explicit for students also helps to convey the idea of the importance of addressing both the objective (i.e. mainly structural concerns) and the subjective (i.e. to study aspects of human agency) dimensions of social theory. That being the case, the resting modules of the course consist in examining two dominant narratives of the GFC (the liberal one and a more structuralist one), to then delve into the history of ideas to study the origins of their assumptions, their strengths and their possible flaws. The journey covers the thought of classical political economists (Smith, Ricardo, Marx), to classical political (i.e. Weber) and economic liberalism (i.e. the marginalist school) to the developments of structuralism, intentionalism and poststructuralism reflected in the ideas of influential male and female thinkers of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ Here my role as the teacher is to guide students in analysing the different positions in the structure and agency debate to critically assess social theories depending on the emphasis each of these places in structural determinism, intentional action, forms of rationalism and the role of material and cultural elements accounting for possibilities of social transformation. I assume that my doctoral training in social theory provides me with analytical tools to guide students through that navigation among fallible social theories in their attempts to unveil the material and cultural structures that objectively shape our understandings of society.

In sum, the course seeks to motivate participants to develop critical positions towards the mainstream by first pointing to their personal project as students of (possibly mainstream) development. I aim towards the construction of 'an analytical framework that enables [them] to understand the process through which the individual is constituted as an agent within the structures of [society]'⁶⁹ to help them realise the possibilities, and the opportunities, they have to pursue social change. By bringing in an objective fact (the GFC), with its subjective interpretations, to the table, I, as the course leader, invite students to reflect upon the idea of making development. Is there a unique recipe to foster it? Are there better explanations of (un)development than others, based on the underlying assumptions of different theoretical constructions? By conveying to the students the idea that they can build a different understanding of objective social phenomena, I invite them to challenge the deterministic assumption that there is one single possible way to act in the world. The existence of different explanations of one same phenomenon supports the idea that we can eventually reshape the understandings and the material aspects of the social structures around us. The

reaching of that conclusions entails, however, respecting each student's subjective project to either transforming or reproducing the structures of the world in which they inhabit.

Final remarks

This article makes a critical overview of Harcourt and her colleagues' approach to introducing development studies to graduate students. By delving and problematising the assumptions of the PD toolbox to teaching development, and discussing elements of an alternative approach, I suggest two principles to engage in this task. First, all teaching endeavours should depart from the subjective projects of students pertaining their expectations on learning development. Secondly, teachers should profit from their authority in the classroom, and from their status as mature students, not to deliver neutral knowledge to students, but to guide them in the building of their critical thinking. Such an exploration entails acknowledging and studying, via fallible social theories, the objective aspects of reality, before encouraging students to contrast them with their subjective experiences. I argue that PD does not deal enough with these elements, a fact that helps in understanding why an important number of Harcourt and her colleague's students found it hard to engage in the course.

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Note on Contributor

Juan David Parra Heredia holds an MA in Economics and is a doctoral candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam. His research comprises the applications of realist epistemologies and methodologies to inform policy debates. He is a consultant in policy evaluation in Colombia and teaches Political Economy at Universidad del Norte (Barranquilla). He has published in journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

Notes

1. According to the study plan of the institute, 'The course will be a critical introduction to theories and strategies of international development looking at development strategies from cultural, historical, and political economic perspectives. The General Course is compulsory for all students and consists of lectures and tutorials.'
2. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2715.
3. Parada, "Realismo crítico en investigación en ciencias sociales."
4. One visible exception is the Interdisciplinary Centre of Development Studies, part of Los Andes University, which offers postgraduates degrees specifically in development studies.
5. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2704.

6. Ibid., 2714.
7. Ibid., 2714.
8. Freire, quoted in Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2714.
9. Ibid., 2714.
10. Ibid., 2714.
11. Ibid., 2715.
12. Ibid., 2708.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 218.
17. Ibid., 216.
18. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2708.
19. Ibid., 2709.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Gadotti and Torres, "Paulo Freire: Education for Development," 1259.
23. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 75.
24. Walsh, "Decolonial Pedagogies Walking and Asking," 14.
25. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2711.
26. Parra, "Critical Realism and School Effectiveness Research."
27. For a literature review, see Parra, "Critical Realism and School Effectiveness Research." Further in the document I will introduce authors that use CR to analyse higher education.
28. In Escobar's view "[i]f it is true that there is an "anthropological structure" that sustains the modern order and its human sciences, it must be investigated to what extent this structure has also given rise to the regime of development, perhaps as a specific mutation of modernity. A general direction for this anthropology of modernity has already been suggested, in the sense of rendering "exotic" the West's cultural products in order to see them for what they are.' Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 11.
29. Ibid., 218.
30. Ibid., 7–8.
31. Bhaskar and Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 75.
32. Collier, *In Defence of Objectivity*, 133–9.
33. Archer, "Objectivity and the Growth of Knowledge," 117.
34. Sayer further clarifies such distinction by referring to the ontological dimension of objectivity, where "objective" means "pertaining to objects themselves", and its epistemological one, where it 'means "true"; Sayer, "Power, Causality and Normativity," 189.
35. Archer, *Social Origins of Educational Systems*, 55.
36. Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela, "Sighting Horizons of Teaching in Higher Education," 118.
37. Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, 314.
38. Willmott, "Structure, Agency and the Sociology of Education," 9.
39. Porpora, *Reconstructing Sociology: The Critical Realist Approach*, 131–2.
40. Knio, "Structure, Agency and Hezbollah," 858.
41. Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, 18.
42. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2708.
43. Engeström and Sannino, "Whatever Happened to Process Theories of Learning?"
44. Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela, "Sighting Horizons of Teaching in Higher Education," 115.
45. Clegg, "Forms of Knowing and Academic Development Practice," 412.
46. Williams, "Rethinking 'Learning' in Higher Education."
47. Clegg, "Forms of Knowing and Academic Development Practice."
48. Kahn, "Theorising Student Engagement in Higher Education."
49. Kahn, Qualter, and Young, "Structure and Agency in Learning"
50. Ibid., 864.
51. Cruickshank, "Introduction," 1.

52. Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, 133.
53. Kahn, Qualter, and Young, "Structure and Agency in Learning," 862.
54. These are the three stages suggested by Kahn, Qualter and Young; *Ibid.*
55. Williams, "Rethinking 'Learning' in Higher Education," 320 (my emphasis).
56. Kahn, "Theorising Student Engagement in Higher Education," 1008.
57. Bhaskar and Hartwig, *The Formation of Critical Realism*, 173.
58. Harcourt, "The Making and Unmaking of Development," 2714.
59. The first footnote in the article quotes the aim of Harcourt and her colleagues' course. Given its introductory spirit, and provided that institution offers it as one that is a pre-requisite to the next courses of the master's programme, there are no major reasons to assume that its students are experts, or even knowledgeable, about the epistemological grounds of the different theories of development. Students that enrol in this masters programme have different backgrounds, and not all of them have undergraduate degrees in politics or sociology.
60. Palma, "Why did the Latin American Critical Tradition," 261–2.
61. 'In fact, critical development scholarship has since come to be characterised by hard-hitting yet sterile, repetitive and aprioristic critiques of neoliberal capitalism that document the plight of the poor and marginalised in the developing world, unwilling and unable to articulate a constructive agenda for development'; Arsel and Dasgupta, "Critique, Rediscovery and Revival in Development," 646.
62. Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*, 5.
63. *Ibid.*, 15.
64. Peck, Theodore and Brenner, "Neoliberalism, Interrupted," 15.
65. Marsh, "Keeping Ideas in their Place," 90.
66. Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*, 7.
67. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 65.
68. For a discussion of these approaches see Hay, *Political Analysis*.
69. Watson, *Foundations of International Political Economy*, 99.

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